

ROBERT FROMER

P. O. Box 71, Windsor, Connecticut 06095-2205
E-mail: saintrobert@comcast.net

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Chairman, Co-chairman and Members
Environment Committee
Legislative Office Building, Room 3200
Hartford, CT 06106

Re: Senate Bill 215, An Act Concerning the Establishment of New State Parks

Dear Chairman, Co-chairman and Members:

I offer special thanks to the Environment Committee for conducting its hearing on the proposed bill.

I very strong oppose the insertion of new restrictive language into existing statutes regarding establishment of any additional state parks. This language would obligate the State to hold public hearings in the town or towns within whose boundaries a state park is planned prior to its establishment and further requires that dedicated funding sources and a long-term fiscal plan be in place in advance of the hearings.

The decision to designate a property as a State Park, with good reason, has never been based upon its future economic viability or its possible contribution to the prosperity of the town or towns in which it is situated. Decisions have been science and culture based and focused on consideration of careful future recreational use by the public.

The mission of the Connecticut Park System is to protect and preserve the State's irreplaceable natural and historic treasures and its mandate to open those properties in its care for the benefit and responsible use of every citizen.

Conservation property purchased with State money or donated by benefactors for preservation and public use should never serve the interests of a narrow sector of the citizenry, restrict access, or conflict with the intent with which it was purchased.

Sometimes the mission and mandate of the Park System can be at odds with the desires of a local government for a conservation property's use. Certainly the owner of the property, the State and its citizens, should determine that use without interference.

This statute change, by miring the process of State Park designation in local public hearings, will likely totally shift decision- making power by default to the local level. The process would henceforth be governed by "the least common denominator"; decision criteria would inevitably develop focusing on the narrow self-interests of the host townships – viz., property taxes.

Local government focuses on its own contemporary needs, problems, and economic pressures. It would be highly unlikely that it would give more than passing consideration to the long term goals or desires of those outside their community.

There has never been any means to definitively predict the operational and personnel funds allotted to the Park System each budget cycle, especially if executive leaders shift after an election. The Governor's staff determines bonding project priorities; everyone else is left to guess what will appear on a bonding agenda. Predicting time frames for projects or being guaranteed funding sources is almost impossible in the best of budget times. In our present climate absolutely nothing is certain. What possible reliable information on funding or budgets could feasibly be shared in local public hearings?

If towns or cities learn in advance of plans to designate a property a state park and object to that scenario, they may initiate meritless legal actions to delay the process. Fending off those actions will cost the State and its citizens a great deal of money and tie up precious resources and staff time. This would create total gridlock and dampen all future prospects for acquisition and protection of new land.

If towns are allowed to dominate the process of designation, it would further embolden legislators to carve off existing park and forest lands for their parochial purposes. Each budget session, the Land Conveyance Bill is regularly misused by legislators. Supposedly protected State park and forest lands have been confiscated without hearing or compensation and been simply handed over to towns and cities to address local needs or desires. A statute change such as that in SB 215 would make all park lands, existing or future, vulnerable to wholesale poaching.

In many cases, State Park lands are/were gifted to the state either while a person is alive or, through their wills, upon passing. Some properties are meant to be an addition to a state park, forest or Wildlife Management Area. A public hearing, development plans, and some approximation of operational costs prior to an individual gifting or willing a property to the state would certainly discourage any living person from being benevolent, and virtually impossible after someone passed on. The state would certainly stand to lose many desirable parcels.

Likewise, property owners of parcels desired by the state, and supported by the community, are already subjected to a lengthy process of surveys and appraisals. Another layer of requirements where there is haggling over a development plan for a park, would likely send most landowners running in the opposite direction.

There have been many instances where the state has acquired property to protect it for future recreational development. This is especially true when budgets are tight and funding for personnel and operating costs are not possible. Sunrise Resort, East Haddam is a recent example and Silver Sands in Milford was also acquired with no immediate plans. Should the State in

future allow such amazing properties to be developed by private developers because there is no dedicated funding or definitive plans?

The development of state parks is often a matter of timing. Fort Trumbull State Park in New London, as an example, took less than two years from the initial discussion of turning this property from a military base into a State Park until the ribbon cutting in time for OPSAIL2000. If there was a requirement to hold hearings, develop plans, and have funding in place to operate this facility, the park would never have met the deadline to be a focal point of the OPSAIL celebration.

Where will the funding (and staff) come from to develop plans for each parcel the state wishes to acquire? Will the legislature be willing to spend a great deal of money for each parcel with no guarantee that the property will ever be acquired/developed by the state should a local public hearing be negative?

Very truly yours

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Robert Fromer". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Robert Fromer
Environmental Consultant